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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [ASEC](#) [IT](#) [ANTITERRORISM](#) [FORCE](#) [PROTECTION](#)

SUBJECT: ITALIANS WONDERING IF THEY'RE NEXT

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Classified by Political Minister-Counselor David D. Pearce,
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (S) Summary. Both center-right and center-left politicians remain focused on the possibility of a major terror attack in Italy in coming months. An adviser on Middle East Affairs in the prime minister's office told us he sees a high possibility of an Al-Qaida attack somewhere in Italy during the Olympics in February or just before national elections here next spring. Italian security forces were doing everything possible to prevent such a contingency, but it was difficult to defend against. In the same vein, a center-left parliamentarian said that while there was no specific information about a possible attack during the Olympics or elections, it was the government's analysis that this could be a particularly "delicate moment". The prime minister's adviser felt the domestic political fallout of an attack was unpredictable; Italy was not the UK, nor was it Spain. He said center-left and center-right politicians alike tended to be nonpartisan in their support of counter-terrorism action. Whether the Italian presence in Iraq came in for increased criticism, in his view, would depend on the opposition leadership. Other analysts point out that such an attack -- or even heightened concern and chatter about the prospect -- could strengthen the center-right's prospects at the polls. End Summary.

2. (S) An adviser on Middle East Affairs in the prime minister's office October 18 told Pol M/C he thought there was a high possibility of an Al-Qaida attack somewhere in Italy during the Olympics or just before national elections here next spring. Stressing that he spoke privately, the adviser noted that the pattern with al-Qaida until now has been that it follows through on its threats, and Italy has been specifically cited (reftel). He noted that the Olympics in February and national elections in the spring (note: April 9 is the expected date for legislative elections. end note) were obvious targets of opportunity. Italian security forces were doing everything possible to prevent such a contingency, but it was difficult to defend against. "I take the train and metro every day," he said. "It would be very easy for someone to get a bag of explosives on board."

3. (S) What was less clear, he said, was what the impact would be of any attack. Italy was not the UK, where the citizenry quickly rallied behind the government after the London underground bombings. Nor was it Spain, where the government had blundered and angered the public by initial efforts to blame the al-Qaida terrorist action on Basque separatists. It was not inconceivable that some politicians on the left would point the finger at the Italian presence in Iraq as making Italy a target. (Note: The center-right has also criticized talk of troop withdrawal by center-left politicians as inviting attacks. End note.) But politicians of both the center-left and center-right tended to be nonpartisan when it came to support for counter-terrorism action. Moreover, he noted, many voters would understand full well that the aim of an attack would be to undermine the Berlusconi government and accelerate Italian troop withdrawal from Iraq. That could actually trigger a backlash of support for the center-right, as well as higher voter turnout, which generally favors the center-right.

4. (U) Meanwhile, Italian newspapers reported Interior Minister Giuseppe Pisanu's meeting October 18 with the bicameral parliamentary oversight committee for the security services. Pisanu told the legislators there was no specific evidence, but the security forces will be especially alert during the Winter Olympics in Turin and the elections. The head of the oversight committee, center-left parliamentary Enzo Bianco, said, "there are analyses, not precise information. But international terrorism continues to choose moments of particular exposure for any country, and it's clear that (for Italy) this could be the most delicate moment."

5. (S) The prime minister's adviser said it was difficult to predict the domestic political fallout of any attack; Italy was not the UK, nor was it Spain. Center-left and center-right politicians alike tended to be nonpartisan in their support of counter-terrorism action. The extent to which the Italian presence in Iraq became a greater issue would depend on the opposition leadership.

16. (S) Comment: To date, we have no specific threat information about potential attacks on Americans at the Olympics, and the interagency Galileo intelligence unit being established at Embassy Rome for the games will compile threat, and disseminate law enforcement, information releasable to the Italian authorities to assist them in deterring attacks in Italy. All sides of the political spectrum here seem to recognize that Italy may be under heightened threat in coming months. Some, like the prime minister's adviser, point out that an attack could lead to stepped-up criticism of the Italian role in Iraq. Others point out that such an attack could actually backfire and strengthen the center-right's prospects at the polls. Others point out that an actual attack, or even heightened concern about security and terrorism, could generate a higher voter turnout. This, in turn, would help the center-right, whose voters tend to be less ideologically motivated than those on the left. End comment.

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